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ABSTRACT

In the midst of insistent demands for accountability, self-analysis by all educational institutions has become an urgent necessity. Long-range, comprehensive planning is an essential prerequisite for coping effectively with the rapid changes taking place in education, and institutional research is an essential element in such planning. For an institutional research program to be comprehensive, it must embrace assessments within five major areas: (1) allocation of resources (fiscal allocations, personnel resources, and physical facilities); (2) student potential; (3) achievements (student achievements, instructional methodologies, student expectations, and institutional climates); (4) curriculum and program needs and priorities; and (5) college impact upon the community. In order to be most helpful to college executives and managers, the institutional research staff must work in close contact with the office of the college president and still maintain the detachment necessary to view the institution objectively. This paper reviews the role of the institutional researcher and presents the highlights of an actual long-range planning model used at William Rainey Harper College. (DC)

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Institutional Research & Management Challenges

Educators acknowledge that their ultimate purposes are to develop self-disciplined, responsible, thinking citizens for a free society, and to facilitate the maximum fulfillment and self-realization of each individual. Unfortunately - there is less agreement on how to do this!

In the fierce competition for financial resources, both through government and private support, a major problem now - and in the foreseeable future- will be the determination of national priorities. And I might add, parenthetically - that the setting of priorities should be an entitlement of the citizenry rather than of a few priviledged or vested interests.

Specific strategies may be employed to cope with the tremendously rapid changes that are taking place in education. An essential prerequisite for coping effectively with such changes is the function of long-range, comprehensive planning. And - a helpful partner in accomplishing such long-range planning is institutional research, or the systematic self-study by a college which is designed to improve the institution.

As Arthur Cohen, Director of ERIC - Junior College Clearinghouse has noted:- "By definition, institutional research is problem-oriented; directed towards the problems pertaining to a single institution. Some type of institutional research is - or should be - directed toward providing data useful or necessary in making administrative decisions, and for successful maintenance of college operations. It is sometimes called applied operations research because, at its best, this is what it is."

Thus - in the midst of insistent demands for accountability, self-analysis by all educational organizations has become an urgent necessity. For as Fred Snyder, Director of Research for the Virginia Community College System has pointed out: - "Legislators, Board

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members, taxpayers, even students and parents, are asking the college to account for its efforts and resources. It must respond, for the alternative to self-examination and direction, is submission to interests beyond the college. These conditions have given critical impetus to the role of the institutional researcher."

If one accepts this basic outlook, what is the role of the institutional researcher in collegiate long-range planning? First, and foremost, it is gathering and providing data upon which to base management decisions. Institutional research is a staff, service function - not a line management, decision-making or evaluation function. In all - the institutional researcher must do more than stir up trouble. As someone has suggested - the institutional researcher must be more than the vice president for heresy! To be constructively useful in the organization, the institutional researcher must be a facilitator, a catalyst - not a line management decision-maker. If the institutional researcher is to be accepted without suspicion or hostility, he - or she, must not act in such a way as to pre-empt or appear to pre-empt the prerogatives of administrators.

For the institutional research program to be comprehensive, it should embrace assessments within five major components: These include: (1) Allocation of Resources. In this area would be included fiscal allocations, personnel resources, and physical facilities. Detailed data-gathering, as appropriate, could yield results relating to cost benefits analysis, unit cost analyses of plant operations, maintenance, cost of instruction, etc.

Area (2) assessments relate to student potential and can form base-line data against which to compare outcomes upon completion of the program of study. The third area is concerned with achievements and may generate data relating to student achievements, instructional methodologies, student expectations, and institutional climates.

The two remaining broad categories include - fourth: analysis of curriculum and program needs and priorities, and fifth - assessing the college's impact upon the community. Within each, specific strategies may be employed to obtain detailed assessment data.

How best may institutional research serve the college executives and managers in its data-collection/evaluation functions? Nevitt Sanford claims that what is needed is theoretically oriented, long-term studies of educational institutions. He believes the institutional research agency should deal in pure research, and should be relatively independent of the host institution. On the other hand, John Dale Russell would like to see institutional research attached directly to the office of the president. It would work toward providing data for decision-making and be primarily concerned with ways and means of saving money. Personally, - I suspect that either approach alone, is essentially a sterile one. Solving immediate, day-to-day problems is an on-going management requirement. Problem-solving research is certainly of practical value. And yet, uniformed by theory, ultimately such problem-solving research alone goes nowhere. Almost by definition, problem-solving research pays little or no attention to the fundamental purposes of an institution, or the value systems that control it. However - institutional research that is entirely theoretically-oriented may result in theories detached from the institutional 'realities'. It may not be understood or accepted, and may lose touch with the reality dimension of - "we must reach some sound decision to solve this problem now!"

In a practical, compromise sense - institutional research collects, analyzes, interprets, and reports information. Based upon this description, institutional research is most often viewed as a resource for planning. Among its several activities, it provides the quantitative data base and interpretations required in the planning process. Perhaps citing the highlights from an actual planning model will best illustrate this point. What follows relates to a long-range plan developed several years ago at William Rainey Harper College, a community college in Illinois.

Step 1: The mission, goal, and objectives of the organization are first determined.

2: Exploration of various alternatives to implement the objectives.

3: Institutional research is carried out on costs and effects.

4: Evaluation and priority setting takes place.

5: A time schedule of events is designed within the framework of available resources and is proposed to the organization.

6: Feedback is received, modifications made, and the plan carried out.

7: Finally, a monitoring process is set up to review and evaluate progress, and to update the plan.

A decision matrix was developed which listed all alternatives to be considered and the criteria by which these alternatives were to be evaluated. This decision matrix became the outline for the rest of the long-range planning process. Institutional research to be undertaken was then identified. This provided the information required in the decision matrix to evaluate the various alternatives. Recommendations were made, and implemented, concerning physical expansion, district expansion, financial planning, governance, accountability, academic scheduling and calendars, utilization of faculty resources, program mix and breadth, innovation, grading and retention, and internal services. Thus, institutional research contributed valuable substance to a long-range plan involving major revisions and improvements in the policies and practices of this two-year college.

Although the potential influence of sound institutional research is great, college presidents and faculty committees will not be replaced or diminished by institutional research and planning activities. On the contrary, these partners in management can only exist when they are created and nurtured by presidents and faculties. By clearly specifying the boundaries and objectives for the work of institutional research specialists they select,

the college leaders can provide themselves with a valuable staff resource to develop data to help ease their burdens of decision-making. In fact - it may not be too extreme to suggest that the influential institutional research organizations of the future will be those that are concerned with planning and testing the probable effects of pending decisions.

In short - to avoid the twin pitfalls of complacency and misdirection, on-going institutional self-study and long-range planning are management practices essential to meet the challenges of the future.

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